

GLOBAL

An Israel 'Conspiracy Theory' That Proved True—but Also More Complicated

A *New York Times* correction is an object lesson in writing about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, where the reality is almost too strange to believe.

NERI ZILBER APR 27, 2018



A Palestinian protester during clashes with Israeli troops, near the settlement Beit El, in May (MOHAMAD TOROKMAN / REUTERS)

To report on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is to invite criticism and controversy. In what is arguably the most well-covered story in the world (perhaps before the rise of Trump), any mistake is amplified, with both sides often accusing media outlets and journalists of bias. Yet *The New York Times* recently took this journalistic truth to another level with a severely unforced error. In a wholly unrelated profile on Facebook's Campbell Brown, the Grey Lady was forced to issue a long correction due to a throwaway line touting "Palestinians Pay \$400 million Pensions For Terrorist Families" as an example of "far-right conspiracy programming" peddled on the social network.

In fact, as the *Times* subsequently clarified, "Palestinian officials have acknowledged providing payments to the families of Palestinians killed while

carrying out attacks on Israelis or convicted of terrorist acts and imprisoned in Israel; that is not a conspiracy theory.”

Such payments, in truth, have risen to the top of the policy agenda in Washington over the past year. The omnibus spending package passed in March by Congress included a bill called the Taylor Force Act, which cuts U.S. aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) until the practice of paying imprisoned terrorists and the families of dead terrorists is ended. (Taylor Force was a U.S. army veteran who was killed in a Palestinian attack in Israel in 2016.) The Israeli government, as well, has long called for such a measure and has debated passing a comparable bill in the Knesset. As President Donald Trump said on his visit to the West Bank last May, “Peace can never take root in an environment where violence is tolerated, funded, and even rewarded.”

And yet, while certainly not a “conspiracy theory,” the headline wafting on Facebook doesn’t quite do justice to the complexity of this Palestinian practice or the real-world implications of ending it.

First, it isn’t solely terrorists and their families who receive official Palestinian financial support. Rather, many other Palestinians imprisoned in Israeli jails for lesser offenses—including what some in the world might consider civil disobedience or political activism—are entitled to the stipend. Second, the families of Palestinians killed by Israeli security forces also receive assistance: some of these, to be sure, were terrorists “neutralized” (in Israeli security parlance) either before or after an attack, but also those injured or killed in error. Finally, the dollar amount cited in most press accounts and by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu—around \$350 million per year, 10 percent of the annual PA budget—is likely inflated, as *The Washington Post*’s Glenn Kessler recently explained in painstaking detail.

Definitional arguments regarding “terrorists” (for Israelis) and “martyrs” (for Palestinians) aside, the bigger challenge when discussing this Palestinian practice is that there’s truth to both sides’ claims about its wider impact. Israelis maintain that for some Palestinian attackers, these payments act as an incentive: They enable embarking on a terror attack with the safe knowledge that the attackers’ families will be taken care of after the fact, in Palestinian terms quite well (“pay to slay,” as it’s called by some).

Palestinians, not surprisingly, tend to emphasize the social and familial perspective, and less the fact that unabashed terrorists sit in jail drawing official salaries. “One out of every three Palestinian males has spent time in Israeli prison. Is any rational human being going to claim that ... one-third of Palestinians are terrorists?,” Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas asked last year through a proxy at the Herzliya Conference, an annual policy gathering in Israel. “Payments to support families are a social responsibility to look after innocent people impacted by the incarceration or killing of loved ones as a result of the military occupation.”

Perhaps most important, this Palestinian practice has to be understood as a longtime policy dating back to the Palestine Liberation Organization’s guerrilla battles with Israel in the 1960s. The PA has simply continued the practice, the termination of which would be, as one Palestinian official put it, “nothing short of political suicide” for Abbas.

In private conversations, Palestinian officials are adamant they won’t stop the payments—recent congressional legislation and Trump administration demands notwithstanding. The irony, too, is that these stipends come out of the very same coffers that pay for the PA’s security forces, who work in tandem with their Israeli counterparts to stop such attacks from happening in the first place.

In a more positive Israeli-Palestinian political context, one could envision a Palestinian move to differentiate between payments to “heavy” security prisoners with blood on their hands, as Israel calls them, and the genuine political prisoners, orphans, and the like that Abbas speaks of. Yet this is far from a positive moment in this longest-running, and most controversial, of conflicts.

We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to letters@theatlantic.com.

MARK THE NEWS AS READ

Get a roundup of the most important and intriguing stories from around the world, delivered to your inbox every weekday.

Enter your email

Sign Up

THE VALUE OF GOOD JOURNALISM

Subscribe and support our coverage of the ideas that matter – with up to 78% savings.

SUBSCRIBE >



ABOUT

CONTACT

PODCASTS

SUBSCRIPTION

FOLLOW

[Privacy Policy](#) [Advertising Guidelines](#) [Terms Conditions](#) [Responsible Disclosure](#) [U.S. Edition](#)
[World Edition](#) [Site Map](#)

TheAtlantic.com Copyright (c) 2019 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.